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# Hariti: Village Origins, Buddhist Elaborations and Saivite Accommodations

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## **Hariti: Village Origins, Buddhist Elaborations and Saivite Accommodations**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I examine the iconography, contemporary worship and mythology of a local goddess, Erukamma, in the city of Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India to reconstruct her associations with the goddess Hariti who is known throughout the Buddhist world of Southeast and East Asia. In order to establish Hariti's connection with Erukamma and her ancient origins and significance, I analyze the translations of Taisho texts that refer to Hariti's story and worship. My aim in this paper is to argue the following: while the Buddhist renderings allow goddesses such as Hariti to travel beyond the Indian sub-continent, there have been many goddesses like Hariti in the Indian context whose cults were submerged in the developing Buddhist cultic world. A reverse process has also occurred when Buddhism has lost ground such as in the case of Erukamma. In these instances, goddesses like Erukamma reflect adaptations of new religious trends while retaining characteristics of their original village origins.

### **Introduction**

When I was doing field-work on the folk goddesses of Andhra Pradesh in 1991, I came across a jumbled mix of goddesses with different backgrounds. Among these goddesses whose iconography and myth puzzled me most was the goddess Erukamma. Erukamma's myth resembled the story of mother Hariti that we know through Buddhist accounts. Increasing my curiosity, goddess Hariti kept appearing to me in the form of sculpted images at Buddhist archaeological sites that I had visited to collect information about early Mahayana bodhisattvas in the Krishna River valley. Since then I have started looking for more information about the origins of Hariti in Andhra and her transformation in a post-Buddhist context.

That the Hariti cult was known in Andhra, as it seems to have been in many other parts of the Buddhist world as well, is amply attested by some sculpted images of Hariti usually seated with a child sitting on her lap. These images are mostly found outside the remains of refectories of Buddhist monastic complexes. The Hariti images that I encountered come from the early Buddhist places like Nagarjunakonda, Sankaram (Bojjannakonda), Salihundam etc (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>1)</sup> On a stylistic basis, the Hariti figures in Nagarjunakonda and Sankaram are assigned to the 4th century

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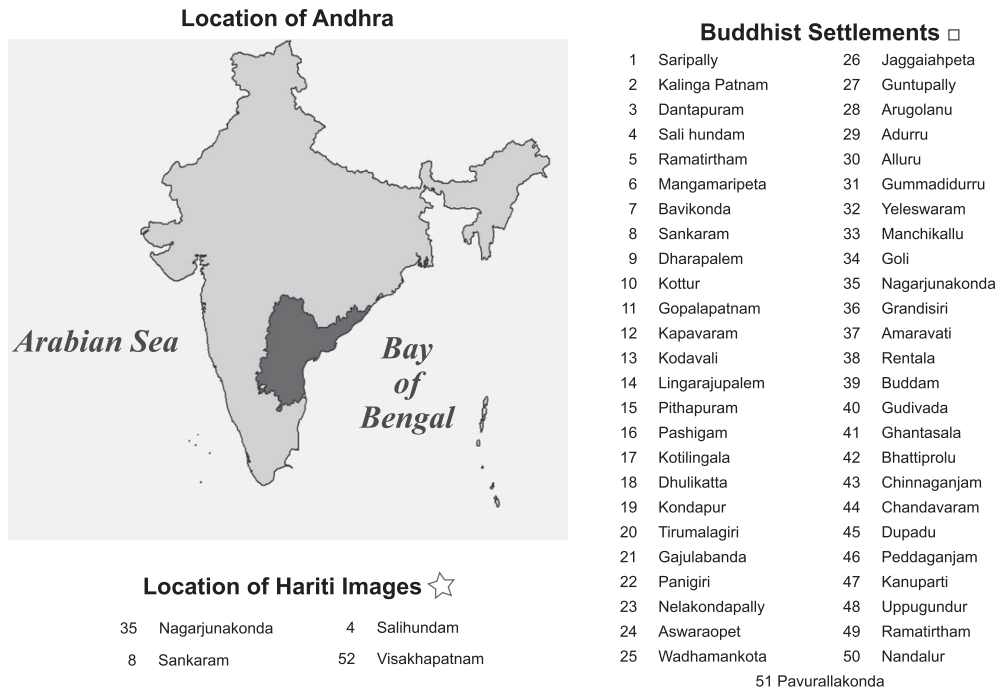


Fig. 1. Map

CE (Figures 3 and 5).<sup>2)</sup> Note that the Hariti figure at Sanakaram, somewhat better preserved, not only holds a child in her lap but also wears a crown with children as motifs, implying her status as possessing countless children.

Archaeological evidence points to the fact that Hariti figures started appearing only with the appearance of the Mahayana phase of Buddhist tradition. Her images are often seen enplaced in monastic complexes. Hariti is sometimes portrayed along with her husband Panchika, or Panduka, at the entrance or at the end of dining halls elsewhere in India. Hariti and Panchika are also seen in the bas-reliefs of Gandhara and Mathura.<sup>3)</sup> In these contexts they both seem to symbolize wealth, abundance and prosperity. The Hariti cult spread beyond the Indian sub-continent to be part of the Buddhist cultural world in central, east and south-east Asia as it is well documented in a recent book.<sup>4)</sup> I-Tsing's record suggests that Hariti's images were popular in certain parts of China by the

1) Sarkar and Misra [1987: 29], Hanumatha Rao [1993: 39, fn. 44].

2) Krishna Murty [1989: 53-55].

3) Srivastava [1979: 88]. A couple of Gandhara sculptures of Hariti, one with a baby in her lap and the second holding a cornucopia, seated next to Panchika are preserved in the British Museum, London.

4) Maheshwari [2009].

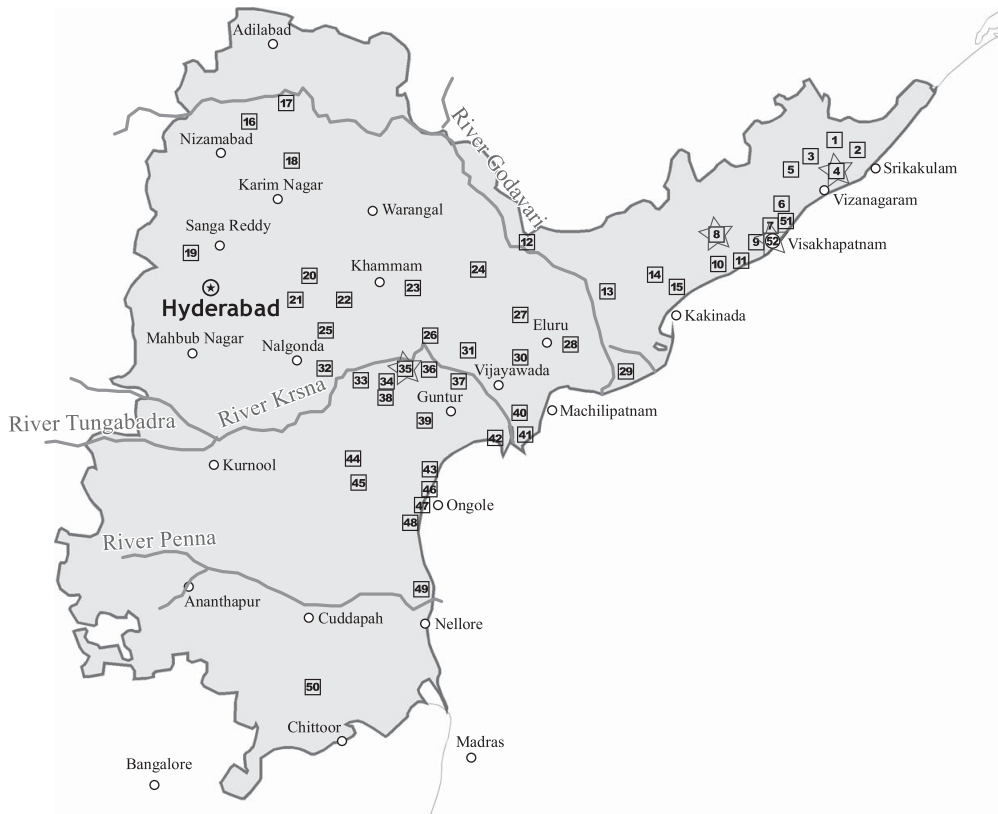


Fig. 2. Andhra

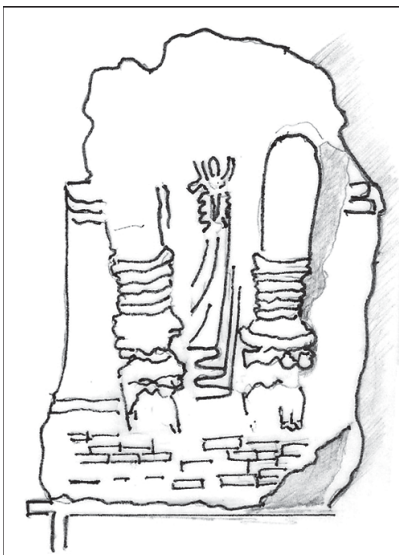


Fig. 3. Hariti, Nagarjunakonda

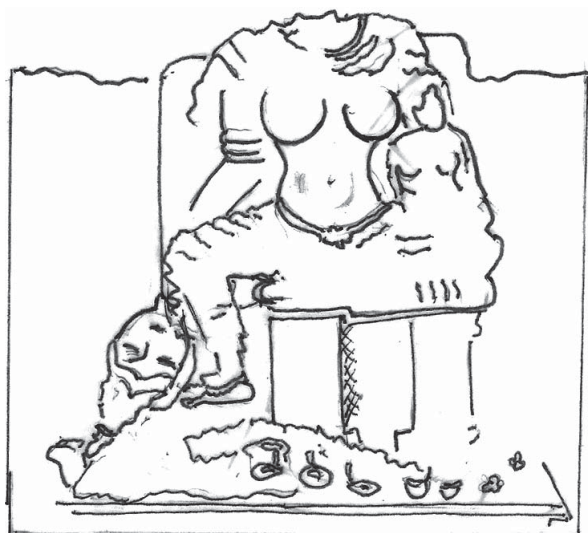


Fig. 4. Erukamma



Fig. 5. Hariti, Sankaram

7th century.<sup>5)</sup>

According to mythic accounts, Hariti was a mother of five hundred children. She was often portrayed as carrying a child while flanked by at least four of her other children. The widespread popularity of the story of Hariti's conversion to Buddhist path is indicated by the fact that it is recorded in many Buddhist texts such as the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* (145, ch. 31), the *Avadanakalpalata*, and I-Tsing's and Huan Tsang's records.

My focus in this paper is to study the nature of Hariti's incorporation into Buddhism with the assumption that she originally has a folk origin. My aim is first to discuss the significance of how Hariti becomes a popular deity with a close association to Buddhism and then explore her cultic transition through the local goddess Erukamma in a suburb in Visakhapatam city in Andhra Pradesh.

When I-Tsing visited India between 671 and 695 CE, he gave an account of what he witnessed during the ceremony on the Upavastha-day in the Indian Buddhist monasteries: how the goddess

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5) Takakasu [1966: 37].

Hariti was offered food after all *arhats* and *bhiksus* were served.<sup>6)</sup> Then, he relates a summary story of Hariti: Hariti, due to a vow in her previous birth, took the form of a Yakshi, and was a mother of five hundred demons in Rajagrha. She devoured the children of Rajagrha causing much havoc in the city. To teach her a lesson, the Buddha hid her beloved youngest son upon which the demoness approached him with anger. The Buddha thus made her realize empathetically the immense loss suffered by Rajagrha's parents whose children she had devoured. Hariti repented and accepted the religious path as set forth by the Buddha. As a response to her own concern about how to feed her children in the future, the Buddha instructed his *sangha* followers to feed her family in every monastery. It is since that time, I-Tsing says, that the images of Hariti surrounded by children are seen either in the porch or in the dining hall of the Buddhist monasteries where she is offered abundant food on a daily basis. I-Tsing recounts that Hariti, in turn, was worshipped by laity to beget wealth and children. During his visit to India in the first half of the 7th century CE, Hsuan Tsang refers to a stupa dedicated to Hariti to which the common people seeking children, offered prayers.<sup>7)</sup>

### 1. Early Conceptions of Hariti

What sources are there to prove that Hariti has village origins? I will start with D. D. Kosambi who points out that like goddess Hariti, many regional goddesses in the state of Maharashtra were incorporated into Buddhism.<sup>8)</sup> Kosambi is not alone in making this observation. For example, Gail Southerland talks about the assimilation of many folk legends of local goddesses into a Buddhist mythology of Yakshinis.<sup>9)</sup> According to her, Hariti was originally a fertility figure and a protectress of the city of Rajagrha whose demoness side was transformed by the Buddha. Southerland also mentions that Hariti in sculpture not only symbolizes fertility, but that in some representations she seems transformed into an auspicious and gentle goddesses like Bhadra, Lakshmi or Vasudhara.<sup>10)</sup> This is in contrast to what we see in (Buddhist) literature in its various accounts where Hariti is seen almost exclusively as horrific before her conversion to Buddhism. Perhaps this contrast can be explained by the fact that the artisan class were usually not well versed in Buddhist texts and might have still seen her primarily as a fertility figure, while the texts tried to portray her demonic form more prominently to show her dramatic transformation into a benevolent being through the intervention of the Buddha. Curiously, Etienne Lamotte agrees that artisans were responsible for the depiction of life affirming

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6) Takakasu [1966: 37].

7) Watters [1904: 215].

8) Kosambi [1983: 82-109].

9) Southerland [1991: 143].

10) Southerland [1991: 143].

images like Hariti, but only to make his argument about how the artisan class was diverted from the path of true Buddhist faith. I quote:

While producing at will religious or worldly works (great many images of spirits, gods and demi gods including Hariti and Panchika), they (the artists) were easily led astray by their art and on occasions confused the serious with frivolous.<sup>11)</sup>

In any case, Hariti was one of the early goddesses to appear in the emerging Indian Buddhist pantheon of deities. Lamotte cites an important piece of evidence that Hariti was a smallpox goddess in the Gandhara region since very early times.<sup>12)</sup> An inscription that was inscribed on the plinth of a stupa dedicated to Hariti contains a prayer to the goddess to take the smallpox away into the sky. Lamotte also observes in this context that Hariti was worshiped as a smallpox goddess in Nepal and that the protection of monks in placating this goddess still holds true today in a Hariti temple adjacent to the famous Svayambhu stupa in Khatmandu. These references suggest that Hariti, like many village-level goddesses throughout India, was also associated with smallpox and its cure.

In fact, A. D. H. Aivar has written an article on Hariti that traces out her background as a smallpox goddess in the early historic period.<sup>13)</sup> While Peri translates Chinese texts on Hariti into French, Dhirasekera talks about many Buddhist legends about Hariti and her husband Panchika.<sup>14)</sup> A much later study on Hariti comes from Richard Cohen's article, the aim of which is to show how the Hariti cult is part and parcel of Buddhism in Ajanta.<sup>15)</sup> Cohen first shows how Hariti's depiction in cave 2 is in accordance with the description of I-Tsing and then proceeds to prove how the monastic community served as a mediator not only between the Ajanta laity and the goddess, but also between the Buddha (sacred) and Hariti (chthonic). Cohen argues that by placating Hariti through worship and offerings, monks ensured that Hariti did not bring harm but prosperity. This argument is to prove his point of how the pacification of the Hariti cult helps to localize Ajanta's Buddhism. Even earlier, John Strong made a similar argument. I quote:

They (the Buddhists) allowed its (Hariti's) positive side to go on more or less unchanged. Thus her shrine within Buddhist monasteries remained a popular place with laypersons desiring to

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11) Lamotte [1988: 407].

12) Lamotte [1988: 689].

13) Aivar [1970: 10-21].

14) Peri [1917: 1-37], Dhirasekera [1976: 61-70].

15) Cohen [1998: 360-400].

have children. On the other hand, they transformed her negative aspects; under the aegis of the Buddhists, Hariti would no longer devour children, but devour alms given to monks instead.<sup>16)</sup>

My intention here is to study Hariti not from an exclusively Buddhist perspective but to understand what she has signified more generally from a more common folk's view point. What does Hariti mean to common folk? How does Hariti remain as a popular deity during pre-Buddhist and post Buddhist periods? For this, I analyze what I see as the original understanding of the Hariti cult and its transformation during the Buddhist period. First I look at how Buddhists domesticated Hariti into the Buddhist fold and then some of the reasons behind that. For this, I consider three Taisho texts where Hariti's story and the procedure of her worship are mentioned in a detailed manner. The basics of Hariti's story in these texts are the same as in I-Tsing's record but much elaborated.<sup>17)</sup> Commenting on how I-Tsing's record is similar to a *sutra* that traveled from India to China, Lokesh Chandra mentions that the *sutra* that includes the story and worship of Hariti was to help the rulers to establish a Buddhist state. Thus in both Japan and China the *sutra* came to play central role in imperial rituals.<sup>18)</sup> In any case, the Hariti's story as it is told twice in Taisho texts were originally translated from Sanskrit by Amoghavajra in the 8th century CE.<sup>19)</sup> The translation of these Sanskrit texts, into Chinese, especially the second, and third texts, were to some extent already studied by the French scholar Peri.<sup>20)</sup> But the purpose of my study of these texts is basically to look at Hariti's cult from the folk point of view before and after Buddhist transformation.

## 2. Buddhist Elaborations of Hariti in Taisho Texts

On my request, these three texts were translated from Chinese into English in 1993 by the late Edward Chen, Professor of history at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. In serial order, the first Taisho # 1261, entitled as "Hariti mother, words of truth, sutra," talks about various ways of worshipping Hariti and the benefits of each form of worship. The second text, Taisho # 1262, is entitled "Mother of ghost children *sutra* spoken by the Buddha." Here the Buddha encounters Hariti who repents over her evil doings and pledges to do good for the people. The third text Taisho #

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16) Strong [1982: 36].

17) Chandra [2006].

18) Bruswell [2.812].

19) Chandra [1977: 466]. Hariti had five hundred sons, and she is referred to as *panca-putra-sata-parivara* in the Mahayaksi-Hariti-Priyankara-sadhana-vidhi, translated by Amoghavajra during the years A.D. 746-771, into Chinese as *Ta-yo-ch'a-nu-huan-his-mu-pring-ai-tzu-ch'eng-chiu-fa* (Nanjio 1392, Taisho edition vol. 21 no. 1260).

20) Peri [1917: 1-37].



1451, called “Sarvastivadin Record of Miscellaneous Events,” tells the birth story of Hariti and then repeats briefly her conversion by the Buddha. This third text mentions the presence of Amitabha and Avalokitesvara along with the Buddha and ends abruptly with the Buddha asking the opinion of *bhikshus* about the past karma of Hariti and the people of Rajagrha. Although these three texts are overlapping in their accounts, I have discovered that we can see a continuum if they are read in a reverse order. Thus, for the clarity of my argument, I will consider these texts in their reverse order.

The Sarvastivadin Record, Taisho # 1451, opens with the mention of Hariti’s father who was one of the guardians of a royal capital. He promises his Yaksha friend, a guardian of another settlement, to marry his future child to his friend’s future offspring. Hariti was born to him as a beautiful girl named Delight. When she was growing up, Delight developed a secret desire to snatch the children from the capital city and eat them. To divert Hariti from this desire, her younger brother who succeeded his father as a guardian Yaksha, marries her off to the son of the Yaksha to whom his father had promised. After giving birth to 500 powerful children, relying upon her strength, Delight starts preying on other’s children in Rajagrha. The people of Rajagrha started calling her Hariti, the stealer of children and reported her evil doings to the Buddha. In response, the Buddha covers the youngest son of Hariti with his bowl. Greatly distressed, Hariti searches all over for her son, as far as Sakra’s palace where another Yaksha called Amitabha was a guardian. On the advice of one of the devas, Hariti comes to the Buddha pleading with him to find her son without whom she would not want to live. The Buddha asks her to think about the distress of the mothers of Rajagrha who have lost their only child by comparing their distress to her own when she had lost only one out of five hundred children. Hariti understands, repents and agrees to give up her evil ways while accepting the Buddha’s five precepts and three refugees. The Buddha, in return, assures her that in the future she and her five hundred children will be fed by the monks with the alms that they receive from the laity. In this context, The Buddha also mentions that bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was having a festival in the city in his honor. After Hariti’s departure, the Buddha tells his *bhiksus* the account of Hariti’s previous birth in which Hariti, as a pregnant wife of a cowherd, is urged to dance in a feast by a merry making group and loses her pregnancy as a result. Out of revenge, she makes a vow that in her next birth she would eat the children of the royal city, Rajagrha. The lessons of karma seem aptly illustrated by this explanation.

In the Sarvastivadin Record, the mention of Sakra, and other bodhisattvas such as Amitabha and Avalokitesvara, clearly indicate the form of Buddhism in which Hariti as a cult was incorporated. Hariti is portrayed as a beautiful girl who was the delight of her parents. She is not just an ordinary Yakshi who decides to eat the children, but belongs to a family of guardians whose duty

was to protect the residents of the city. She is also portrayed as a great maternal figure who not only gives birth to hundreds of children but also a fierce protector of her off-spring. Thus, Hariti's own protective qualities come through strongly in this text. In spite of all this background, this great mother starts devouring the children of her own city. These ambiguous qualities of Hariti fit into the traits of the smallpox goddess who was believed to have the ability to give or take away the life of children.

As we have seen, we know from Lamotte's study and others that Hariti was famous as a goddess of smallpox in Nepal and in the northwestern parts of India. I want to use the information I have collected on many smallpox goddesses who are also guardian deities of various villages and towns in Andhra Pradesh, India to speculate the original nature of Hariti cult.

The goddesses of smallpox and other contagious diseases who are also regarded as guardian deities are ubiquitous in Andhra. Throughout Andhra, people view these goddesses more or less in the same manner and offer animal sacrifices to satiate them. The names of these smallpox goddesses might vary from region to region. Some of these are called as Mutyalamma, Pochamma, Peddamma, Nukalamma, Ankalamma etc. In the stories I have collected it is clear that some smallpox goddesses are deified human women who died during their pregnancies or when delivering children. Devotees believe that the spirits of these women would bring destruction and death to their children unless they are approached with proper offerings and prayers. In this context it is important to recall the reason for Hariti's devouring children. We have learned that in her previous birth, Hariti lost her pregnancy. It is possible that Hariti was originally a human woman who died in her pregnancy who was later deified and worshipped with animal sacrifices.

Like almost all smallpox goddesses, Hariti was a guardian deity who is said to have protected the people of Rajagrhā. Guardian deities have been worshipped in Andhra with the belief that these goddesses guard the borders of a village/city from all kinds of calamities such as disease, untimely death, pestilence and even from human enemies in the same manner as a mother protects her own children. This is the reason why all these goddesses are simply referred to affectionately as the mother. The word mother in Telugu is "*amma*" and the goddesses I quoted above have this suffix attached to their names. Sometimes, especially in the context of placating the goddess she is respectfully addressed as "*ammavaru*" which means "madam." It is widely believed that guardian deities can be displeased very easily with any little mischief on the part of villagers. A seriously displeased mother can be, therefore, transformed into the devourer of her own village. This displeasure can be seen in any form such as drought, contagious diseases, etc. Until the discovery of vaccinations, smallpox was considered the most serious of deadly diseases. Once smallpox erupted, children were

the first victims of it, and people consequently saw their goddess as a terrible mother, the devourer of their children.

Hariti, being the protectress and the smallpox deity, must have been understood in the same way as other goddesses I have just mentioned. The rituals to this goddess then must have been constituted by animal sacrifices. If that was so, what made Buddhist monks intervene into Hariti's cult and soften her qualities? The second Taisho text gives us some clues to this question.

The second text, "The Mother of Ghost Children Sutra elaborates Hariti's qualities as demoness and mother. In this text, Hariti is just named as "mother." Here, the mother is said to have 1,000 ghost children, 500 in heaven and 500 in this world who harass heavenly and worldly beings. Each of them has tens of thousands of ghosts in their followings. The mother herself steals other people's children and eats them. On hearing about the great disturbance created by the mother, the Buddha sends Ananda and other *sramanas* to obtain all Hariti's 1,000 children and hides them in the monastery. The mother, who realizes that her children are missing, cries and howls and, searches all over for ten days for them. On the advice of a *sramana*, she goes to see the Buddha. The Buddha makes her realize the sufferings of the parents who lost their children to her. He also wants the mother to realize the sufferings of both heavenly and earthly beings due to the harassment caused by her children. The Buddha explains how her children disguise themselves as water spirits, sea spirits, carriage spirits, state spirits and invisible spirits at night and disturb people. The disturbed people, the Buddha says, kill animate beings in order to feed these ghosts while the intention of these ghosts is not to eat offered meat but to delude people to commit sins of killing. On hearing this, the mother repents and takes refuge in the Buddha who bestows on her the five precepts (no killing, stealing, lying, adultery, and intoxication). Then the Buddha allows the mother to see all her children again. The Buddha asks in return to give all her children to the monastery and stay herself by the monastery and to be compassionate to all those who come to ask her favors.

The above story is salient about a number of things. It refers to common people's beliefs about the guardian goddess and the spirits and their ritual practices in which they sacrifice animals to appease these ghost spirits and their mother. Even now, in some Andhra villages, people believe in the types of spirits described in this story. In some village goddess myths, like the myth of Ankalamma that I collected, it is said that all these different spirits are the following of "the mother." In order to appease these spirits, villagers recourse to animal sacrifices such as buffalo, ram, pig and chicken. Buddhism, as a missionary religion, needed to come to terms with folk beliefs in order to spread its own tenets among them. For this, the village goddess, worshiped in different names almost everywhere in India, had to be tamed and so as the other spirits.

Before Buddhism devolved into an elitist monastic tradition, it had striven to be the common people's religion, and in the creation of the Hariti cult it attempted to address common people's needs. The way the common people deal with mysterious diseases and death is to have a belief in these invisible blood thirsty ghosts whom they think would leave them alone if they could appease them with animal sacrifices. What Buddhists did here was to make a compromise with the common beliefs that there is a mother who controls all the ghosts. What Buddhists argued was that however terrible the mother might be, she along with all forms of ghosts can be subdued by the Buddha's powerful dharma. The Buddha and his dharma can channel these powers of the mother and the various forms of ghosts to achieve common good without the necessity of spilling blood. Instead of directly admonishing people not to kill, here an attempt is made through Hariti and other similar goddesses to argue that killings are not necessary to appease the mother or the ghosts. In fact, now the mother herself is ordained into Buddhism while the ghosts are accommodated in the monastery and will now follow the principles set in the dharma.

This transformation was convincing to the common people as it speaks their own language and invokes their symbols. For example, it is a common understanding among village devotees that the mother can appear as a disease herself or possess a particular human being or even the sacrificial animal. Through the vehicle of a human being the mother always spells out her preferences. While it is possible for village devotees, who consist of the majority of population, to feel the presence of the mother in various ways, Buddhists sought instead to simply bring her under control. Here, by taming the majority people's religion, Buddhists wanted to not only popularize to their own religion but also to change people's attitude towards their own gods.

On the other hand, the cult of Hariti became popular not only in those areas where she was worshiped earlier as a goddess of smallpox, but also in other regions such as Andhra. The reason for this is that Hariti's cult is similar to any other smallpox/guardian deities that people are familiar with. As we can see in the second Taisho text where Hariti is called mother, most smallpox goddesses/guardian deities are referred to only as "*amma*" rather than with any personal name. This made possible the identification of the story of the mother with different goddesses in any village or town where a guardian deity is worshiped for all the above stated reasons.

With regard to rituals, in the "Mother of Ghost Children Sutra," the Buddha talks about the harmfulness of bloody sacrifices in inducing others to kill. This raises questions about alternative modes of worship proposed by the Buddhists in relation to the goddess and whether there are any specific instructions about how Hariti should be worshiped.

The first Taisho text, "The Hariti Mother Sutra," which gives instructions on how to worship

Hariti, is helpful in answering our questions. The text starts with Hariti herself explaining to the Buddha how she should be worshiped. Here again we see that the mother herself instructs her devotees to worship her in a particular way that would not be antagonistic to Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist teachings referred to here are Mahayana, in so far as Hariti is regarded as a Bodhisattva and therefore her rituals seem to be of a Tantric nature.

It is not the aim of this paper to go into the discussion of what features can be defined as Tantra. Suffice it to say that the form of worship mentioned for Hariti in this Taisho text does not particularly conform to all the features of the Tantric cult that generally scholars ascribe.<sup>21)</sup> It does, however, contain magical incantations, the repetition of which for a certain number of times is designed to achieve basically any particular wish including the subjugation of enemies. Although offerings to the goddess are mostly vegetarian, we do see in certain rituals, an occasional recommendation of meat offerings.

In “The Hariti Mother Sutra,” Hariti starts explaining the procedure of her worship by praising the value of mantras and their benefits for the good citizens of Jambudvipa. The text goes on to say that women who are not capable of conceiving children should worship the mother in a certain way in order to beget offspring. This worship consists of painting a Hariti image on a white cloth, as a beautiful woman with regal dress sitting in a bejeweled seat with two children standing on her either side and two sitting on her knees and one child in her left arm. The worshiper should meditate on the image in a quiet room. Then the image should be placed on incense ashes in a squared altar with flowers scattered about. Food and drink offerings consist of milk, rice, porridge, a variety of fruits and perfumed water along with incense should be made to Hariti. Then the given mantra (Om, namaha) should be recited a thousand times in the morning, noon and dusk. In order to get whatever is wished, face the image and begin chanting the mantra on the fifth day of a month a hundred thousand times. This procedure of worshipping Hariti is basic for all kinds of wishes although the number of mantra recitations and the offerings made to the goddess and even the ritual observation may vary to a degree.

In one occasion to achieve any wish, Hariti instructs the worshiper that he/she should make offerings first to the images of Buddha and bodhisattvas like Manjusri, Samantabhadra and then to her image. The reason for this is, Hariti says, that the Buddha bestowed on her three refugees and the five precepts of which enable her to come face to face with the bodhisattvas who have achieved the tenth stage.

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21) Bhattacharya [1982: 220].

Interestingly the above text guides common people how to worship their goddess to fulfill their various wishes, rather than instructing monks how to honor Hariti to keep her from harming the common people. This strategy I think is to create a substitute for the earlier form of rituals where common people participate themselves. While the earlier rituals required the participation of all groups in the village where they have assigned roles, the substitute is only meant for one individual's participation for his/her own fulfillment. The recitation of a mantra, the image making, the altar preparation and the various vegetarian food offerings are the alternatives to the earlier form of bloody rituals to the goddess of smallpox. While the mother of smallpox is usually worshiped by the village as a whole, the nature of worship here, in contrast, is for individual men and women to achieve their own personal or family goals. This feature indicates the transformation of Hariti cult where individuals strive for their own betterment rather than as a group for the common good. This shift from common goal to the personal goal can be attributed to the Buddhist context of soteriology.

### 3. Erukamma: The Saivite Accommodation

The same way as Kosambi explained how Buddhism influenced the cults of many village goddesses in Maharashtra during the middle of the first millennium CE., many village goddesses in Andhra were influenced first by Buddhism and then later by Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions. According to Kosambi, many of these goddesses have been portrayed in rock cut relief sculptures in various Buddhist cave complexes and continue to be venerated today in nearby villages. In the case of the Hariti cult in post Buddhist Andhra, the continued veneration of the goddess went through some cultic transformations. An example of this is the image of Hariti at Sankaram considered as a local goddess called Palakamma (Figure 5).<sup>22)</sup>

With the eclipse of the Buddhist tradition by the 8th or 9th century CE, and the simultaneous sweeping wave of Saivism of the same period, many village deities became identified with aspects of the Saivite cult. This seems to be the case with Erukamma, whom devotees identify with Parvati, the consort of Siva (Figure 4). Erukamma is a goddess worshipped in a small but busy temple in Dondaparty, a village that forms part of the city of Visakhapatnam in coastal Andhra. As is the case of many village goddesses in Andhra, Erukamma is attended by a non-brahmin priest. But unlike a typical village goddess, Erukamma possesses a distinct iconography and a unique myth.

The myth of the goddess as narrated by the priest of the temple goes like this: A woman named Erukamma was causing horror by stealing the children in the village and devouring them in a secret

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22) Krishna Murthy [1987: ix-x].

place on the village outskirts. A man of the Erukala (basket weavers) caste happened upon her while she was devouring a recently kidnapped child and immediately cut off her head. After her death, people feared the potential malevolent effects of her revenge. To placate her, they worshipped her and through their petitions were able to redirect her powers for the purposes of village protection.

This rather crude story contains the basic outlines of the extensive myth of Hariti that I have discussed earlier. Having quenched her insatiable appetite for devouring children, the Buddha promised that Hariti would instead be fed rice by his monks for as long as his *sangha* prospered. Hence she came to symbolize the material well-being of the Buddhist community in general and was also venerated by laity seeking offspring. That her cult was popular in Andhra, as it seems to have been in many other parts of the Buddhist world as well, is amply attested by the sculpted images of Hariti, usually seated with a child sitting on her lap, found outside the remains of refectories of Buddhist monastic complexes. But in post Buddhist Andhra, where *sangha* no longer was in prosperity, the story of Buddha's promise to Hariti seemed to be of very little relevance. For, the present myth replaces the Buddha with a man of the Erukala caste who by no means was non-violent in his actions. In this myth, Erukamma becomes one of the many deified women in Andhra, whose potential malevolent effects are feared. In other words, if Erukamma was originally Hariti, now she left her monastic connections to come back to the non-Buddhist populations, which was her original home. By doing so, Erukamma finds herself in the same position as other village goddesses in the wave of Saivism and came to be identified as a form of Parvati. The main difference though is that most village goddesses in Andhra are seen as the forms of Durga. By this identification, these goddesses retain their non-vegetarian nature.

As a form of Parvati, Erukamma is now served liturgically by a Brahmin priest during the rituals constituting her annual festival. But on all other days, it is a non-Brahmin belonging to an agricultural caste, that acts as the ritual preceptor. Worship of Erukamma is usually done directly by the devotees themselves who offer fruits, coconuts, saris and blouse pieces to the goddess after applying turmeric and vermilion. But on the special annual occasions, the Brahmin priest conducts rites on behalf of all devotees for a price. Animal sacrifices are rare, and devotees still take pride in saying that this goddess does not like non-vegetarian food, a reflection of her Buddhist associations with her mythic past. This last point of the goddess accepting only vegetarian food is very rare for village goddesses. In Andhra many regional goddesses of village origins but now served by Brahmin priests are known to accept animal sacrifices on special occasions in specially assigned places. These venues and occasions are set in such a way that Brahmin priests will be absent from the scene. But in the case of Erukamma, her vegetarian preferences like those of Hariti must have been stayed in

the consciousness of devotees in just the same way as some elements of her mythic origins have been preserved. Another element that appears specific in Erukamma's worship is the importance given to the individual offerings to the deity over to the annual ritual offered by the community. The image of Erukamma in her shrine depicts her with the cut-off head lying in front of her and her right arm wrapped around, ostensibly, a kidnapped child who is sitting on her lap (Figure 4). The icon of Erukamma seems much older than the Saivite affiliation of this temple, however. The origin of this icon, though evidently quite old, is not known to the local people or to temple administrators. But the image clearly represents the local myth about this goddess, and no iconographic elements can be linked to Parvati whatsoever. What these details about Erukamma indicate is a very rich and varied amalgamation of practices and beliefs encompassing aspects of religious cults originating from pre-Buddhist, Buddhist, Saivite, and village origins.

Erukamma, in her former incarnation as Hariti, started her origins as a smallpox deity but travelled to Andhra in the incarnation of her Buddhist rendering. In post-Buddhist Andhra, when her sculpture was worshipped as the mother of the village with the name Erukamma, she might be viewed as a smallpox goddess who, in the height of epidemic was the devourer of the children and whose protective power can be invoked by appropriate propitiation. In the absence of smallpox, now her protective function is extended to the well being of families and especially as a goddess with the power to produce male offspring. This is probably the reason why she has been identified by devotees as a form of Parvati who is considered as an ideal wife and a mother of two sons. There is, however, remarkable evidence of amalgamated sources in the narrative and ritual traditions associated with Erukamma, and it is precisely this amalgamation that contributes to her continuing appeal to a diverse congregation.

As a conclusion here I will summarize my observations. When Hariti was worshiped as a smallpox deity in the northern parts of India, Buddhists were likely to have felt a responsibility for diverting people away from violent forms of worship. The result was that Hariti, herself, became a Buddhist goddess. When Hariti's cult was presented in Buddhist guise, the lay people, in fact, were happy that they could continue to worship the mother to ask for their favorite boons, while remaining as Buddhists. Buddhists themselves consciously attributed the same Hariti myth to other guardian deities as well. For example, Strong mentions the conflation of cult of Kunti with that of Hariti in the Mathura region.<sup>23)</sup> The Hariti myth was relevant not only to the Indian sub-continent but beyond as well. It would seem that the same process occurred in relation to Kuei-tzu-mu (Mother

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23) Strong [1982: 37].



of Demon-children), an indigenous mother of demoness figure who was later identified with Hariti when Buddhism was being acculturated in China.<sup>24)</sup>

Curiously, the cult of Kuei-tzu-mu as a goddess of children was reported as kept alive by Chinese women.<sup>25)</sup> Hariti's variations in Japan are known as Karitei or Kishimojin (Kishibojin). Her statues are found in many Buddhist temples in Japan including at Sanjusangendo, Kiyomizudera and Ninnaji. In Andhra, on the other hand, goddesses like Erukamma, whose myth as a stealer of children and whose iconography with a child in the arms, finds herself among Hariti's original haunts. In her Erukamma's form, Hariti not only brings her past imprints of village characters as well as Buddhist soteriology, but also embraces a new identity as the form of Parvati. In all of these vicissitudes, either as Hariti or Erukamma, her basic identity remains.

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24) Watters [1904: 215-217].

25) Watters [1904: 216].

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